

hanging on while the world crashes in

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hanging on while the world crashes in

by [snarkymuch](#)

Summary

Peter is struggling after coming back from the snap. He starts to fall into old habits, ones he thought he were over. He uses a rubber band on his wrist to cope, but eventually those close to him notice. Tony misses nothing.

Notes

Trigger Warning for Self-Harm

I tried to approach this subject with sensitivity but it is still triggering. There are discussions of the guilt and shame around self-harm.

This was written for an anon on Tumblr, who wanted more Peter coping with self-harm, using a rubber band. I hope you like it.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

The battle fell silent, and Peter saw Tony collapse against a piece of rubble. He fought invisible hands as he tried to reach his side. It was like he was moving through molasses. When he reached Tony, he fell to his knees, reaching out unbelieving as his mentor, his friend, laid dying. Empty eyes looked off into nothingness, glazed and unseeing. A scream built in Peter's chest as he reached for Tony, but he couldn't touch him, his hands passed right through ...

He woke himself, panting and clutching the sheets. It was just a dream. Tony was alive and well in his lake house with Pepper and Morgan. It was the same dream he'd had nearly every night. Instead of Captain Marvel using the gauntlet, Tony had, and he'd died in the process.

A thin sheen of sweat coated his skin, and his clothes clung to him. He tried to steady his breathing. It has felt so real.

To the outside world, he'd done his best to put on a good face and pretend that he was okay, but he was far from it. It was all too much to lose five years, having people who were younger than him now older. He felt lost in a sea of emotion, drifting in the currents and struggling not to drown.

It had been a long time since he felt so lost, without a tether. Like when Ben had died, and he'd fought hard against the waves of grief. Nothing had felt stable then, just as nothing did now.

In those times, he'd turned to less than acceptable means to ground himself and find control. A blade offered solace where nothing else could. He knew it was wrong, but the pain was like a lifeline in a stormy sea, stopping the choppy waters long enough to catch his breath.

Like everything, though, May had found out. Maybe Peter wasn't hiding it well on purpose. Maybe he wanted to be discovered. Part of him had known if he didn't stop, he'd keep falling down the slippery slope.

Therapy had become a thing, and he'd learned skills to cope. Holding ice cubes in his hands until they burned, drawing on his arms, but the one that stuck and worked the most was the rubber band. It couldn't be a thin one. It needed to be one with weight and strength. He'd wear it like a bracelet, drawing it back and snapping it hard whenever the storm inside him became too rough, and he felt the urge to cut.

At first, he'd seen the pain in May's eyes when she saw him snapping it, but eventually, it just became part of them. When he fingered the band, May would ask if he was okay. He didn't open up at first, but he soon found himself snapping it less and talking more. The churning sea of emotion became more settled, and he moved on, but he kept his bands in a drawer, just in case he ever needed them again, which now, maybe he did.

So much grief and hurt swirled in him, mixing with loss. He should be happy everyone was okay, that the vanished were returned and Thanos was stopped, but he couldn't change the twisting emotions that wrenched at his heart.

For the first time in a long time, Peter wanted to cut. It wasn't a pretty feeling, and it wasn't okay. He wasn't okay, though. He was spiraling and needed something to stop his fall. He couldn't focus, and everything felt like too much. He craved the feeling of it all being driven down to a sharp point, real physical pain he could control.

With clumsy movements, he pushed himself up, throwing back the covers. His heart was still

beating a bit too fast, and his breaths a touch too shallow. The walls felt like they were pressing in, and his chest ached selfishly for everything he'd lost.

He plunked down in his desk chair and pulled the drawer open with single-minded focus. The little pile of rubber bands gave him pause, and he brushed over them with his fingertips, but that wouldn't be enough, and he knew it. Or maybe it could have been, but he was weak and wanted the real thing.

Pens and paperclips rattled around as he dug to the very back of the drawer, his bottom lip between his teeth. His fingers brushed the plastic outside, and his prize shifted out of reach, but Peter doubled his efforts. His nail caught it, and he dragged it, scrapping, toward the front of the drawer.

The small yellow utility knife sat amongst the clutter with a power that it shouldn't hold. Like a siren call, it drew Peter closer, never taking his eyes off it. His fingers brushed over it before picking it up, turning it in his hand, weighing it, and finding it worthy of the task.

A piece of him knew he shouldn't be doing this, but it was suffocated by the need for an anchor, for something grounding. He told himself that as he looked at the blade that it would be just once, he would use the bands after, but even as he told himself that, he knew it was a lie.

He felt alive as he held it to his skin, and the storm raging inside him quieted as he pressed the blade to the surface of his arm. He drew a stuttering breath through his teeth at the initial sting and then breathed out a sigh. He didn't feel like he was drowning anymore. He felt in control for this first time since Titan.

Blood bubbled up from the cut and dribbled down the side of his arm, weaving a haphazard path until it reached the pale underside and beaded there, ready to drip onto the floor.

He watched it with fascination, grabbed a dirty sock on the floor, and dabbed up the blood with the cleaner looking end. The immediate rush he felt was already fading, and the line the blade had drawn was already sealing over, no match for his super-powered healing.

Adjusting his grip on the knife, he licked his lips, glancing once at the open drawer and nest of rubber bands. He shoved it closed, not wanting to see evidence of his failings staring him in the eye.

With more pressure than the last, he carved a deeper line into his arm, a cut that, unlike the previous, bled free and fast. The blood did drip onto the floor this time, hitting it with tiny splatters. Some landed on his leg and more on his barefoot, running down under his heel.

The only thing he could feel was the burn of the wound. It muted all the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. For a moment, he could just breathe. Sitting in his room, the world made a little more sense, and everything he couldn't understand before was in focus.

The flow of blood had slowed, but it was still running in rivulets down his arm. He pressed the soiled sock to the wound, relishing the stab of pain that came with the action. It would heal in a few hours if it even took that long.

Peeling back the sock, he examined his work. The skin was neatly split, but the blood had stopped.

There was no point in bandaging it, so he cleaned up the blood on the floor and changed his pajama pants. Then, he went into the bathroom and washed the blood from his arm. When he got back to

his room, he slipped the knife back into its hiding spot.

The next morning, he hesitated by his desk, eyeing the drawer. Two very different but connected things were in there. The rubber bands and the knife. He wondered what it said about him that he couldn't decide which to take. Maybe he should take both.

Part of him began to reason that healing his factor protected from real harm, so where was the danger? The small piece of plastic and metal had given him more peace than anything else had in months. After giving in and letting himself have that moment, he'd been able to sleep without dreams of turning to dust.

But then he thought of May and the look she had in her eyes the first time she saw the cuts healing on his arms after Ben, and it felt like the air was sucked from his lungs. She'd trusted him not to cut, and he'd broken that unsaid promise.

Guilt crashed over him at what he'd done, eating him alive like a thousand flesh-eating beetles. There was no going back, though, no pretending he hadn't done it. Even if he didn't tell her, he'd know, and that was enough.

He needed to do better—for himself and for May. He yanked the drawer open and grabbed one of the bands, still unsure what he'd say when May saw it. He stretched it over his hand and let it circle his wrist. He gave a small snap and then shut the drawer and went about getting ready.

May was in the kitchen when he went to grab something to eat before school. She greeted him with a warm smile, grabbing the back of his neck and pulling him down to kiss his cheek.

"Morning, sleepyhead," she said, turning to refill her abandoned cup on the counter. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good," Peter lied, the word tasting chalky in his mouth. Unconsciously, he rubbed the band that circled his left wrist. "How was work last night?"

"You know, a nurse's job is never done. It was busy, but I guess it could have been worse. At least the AC was working." She leaned against the counter, taking a sip of her coffee, but paused and lowered the cup, her eyes locked on Peter's wrist. "Do we need to talk?"

Peter dropped his arm, like that would somehow hide what he'd done. "It's—I'm okay."

May's brows drew together, and she studied him for a moment before setting down her cup and crossing the short distance to Peter. She took his hands in hers, warm and dry against his cold and clammy. She squeezed them, and he did it back.

"You'd tell me if it was getting bad again, right?"

He nodded as the guilt over what he'd done filled his lungs, stopping his breath. He didn't want to lie, but he couldn't tell the whole truth either.

"It can't be easy for you. You've been through a lot. There's no shame in struggling."

He couldn't move his head to nod, so he stared at a point to the side of her face and tried to swallow some of the emotion he was drowning in.

She stayed silent, holding his hands, and after a moment, he chanced a look at her face. The understanding he saw in her eyes just made the pain all that much worse.

"I'm sorry, May." His voice trembled. "I'm so sorry."

"Whatever happened, it's okay. It'll be okay. I know you didn't mean it. And this here"—her thumb touched the band—"this tells me that you want to do better, and that's enough for me."

The rubber band became part of his very existence again, just like it had years ago. He found himself constantly touching it and reminding himself that it was there. When the world became too much, and he felt like he was drifting away, he would snap it and let the sting ground him, reminding him where he was.

It wasn't what he craved, though. It was a cheap replacement for the real thing, but the guilt over what he'd done was enough to keep him from cutting again. Almost.

Over a month had passed since the incident as he called it, where he fell back and reset his count to zero. May asked him every day how he was. Sometimes she would ask him to rate it, the need, from one to ten. Some days were lower than others. Most days, he hovered near a six. A few times after waking up from a nightmare, he'd been higher, but the band brought it back down to a reasonable number, if there ever was such a thing. What was reasonable about wanting to cut your own skin, to watch yourself bleed?

Tony had invited him to spend the weekend at the lake house, and May didn't let him say no. She thought it might be good to get out of the city. If he was honest, it scared him a little, thinking about going. Tony was perceptive, his eyes were sharp, and he rarely missed the details, no matter how hard Peter tried to hide them. Tony didn't know about the cutting or the band. It was the one thing he'd kept from the man. Maybe he was a coward, but he didn't want to see the disappointment in Tony's eyes when he told him. Even though it hurt to lie, it was a necessary evil, a small price to pay for peace of mind.

Peter began to pack a bag, and he paused at the desk, his eyes locked on the drawer, and it wasn't the bands that were calling him. Swallowing a lump of guilt, he opened it and reached into the back, finding the knife. Wrapping it in a sock, he tucked it into his bag, feeling a sickening twist of relief.

The ride to the lake house went quickly, and soon Happy was pulling into the secluded driveway. The weather was hot, so he was wearing short sleeves. Thankfully, there was no scarring from what he'd done before, and to anyone looking, it seemed like he'd collected a random rubber band. There was no hint that it was something more profound.

Morgan greeted him with a hug around his legs when he got out of the car, and Tony stood from the rocking chair on the porch and smiled. He had a glass of something that looked like lemonade in his hand.

Peter grabbed his bag and then let Morgan lead him into the house. The few times he'd stayed over, he was given the guest room near Tony's and Peppers. He wiggled out of Morgan's hold long enough to drop his bag and then followed her as she showed him her bug collection, something that he imagined Pepper wasn't too excited about.

Pepper swept in with a smile and greeted Peter and collected a very disagreeable child for a bath. In all the chaos that was Morgan, he hadn't thought of the band on his wrist, and maybe that was a good thing. He liked to think it was.

The sun was casting long shadows as it set against the trees at the end of the lake. Peter hadn't seen Tony yet, other than to say hi as Morgan dragged him past. He thumbed the band on his wrist and

walked out toward the garage, where Tony was probably hiding.

He knocked on the door to the garage, and Tony's voice came from inside. "It's open."

Peter opened the door and blinked a few times at the dimmer lit room. His eyes didn't really need to adjust much—spider powers and all. Tony wiped his hands on a shop towel, draping it over his shoulder after.

Peter might not have been avoiding him, but maybe he was scared to be around him. Between his memories of his nightmares, and fear Tony would somehow see through him, see how broken he was. He shouldn't be depressed or struggling. He should be thankful and happy that he'd been given another chance and saved, but the only thing he felt was wrong. He didn't feel like he fit like he used to. The world felt like it moved on without him. Perhaps it had.

Without thinking, his index finger hooked the band and snapped it. The little jolt brought him back into the moment, and the sting grounded him there, pushing away a bit of the storm that was brewing inside him.

When Peter blinked, he noticed Tony looking at his wrist, and Peter dropped his arms. He rubbed his palms against his jeans and tried not to shrink under Tony's scrutiny.

"So, what you working on?" Peter asked, hoping to break the tension.

Tony seemed to shake himself out of whatever was on his mind and motioned to the workbench where Pepper's Rescue armor lay. "Just upgrading a few things. Never can be too careful. Could come in useful again someday, though let's hope not."

Peter tried to hide the flinch at the mention of the final battle. "That's cool. Do you need any help?"

Tony's mouth twitched into a smile. "Yeah, of course. I can show you what I've done."

They worked together in silence, Peter more watching than helping. He hadn't been sleeping well, and it was finally wearing him down. He tried hard not to touch the band. It was already stupid to snap it once in front of Tony. It showed too much of his hand. He knew the man would begin looking for answers where Peter didn't want to give them. He reassured himself, though, that at least he wasn't cutting. He'd been doing well.

But not using the band in front of Tony or the rest of the family put him in a bad position. He couldn't keep the urge in check and keep himself grounded. He felt a little like he was floating away. Tony's words drifted past him, not really connecting. Maybe it was tiredness, or perhaps it was something more. Either way, he was having trouble pretending that he was okay and that his world wasn't tilted and off-balanced. He knew the smile on his face rang hollow, and it scared him that Tony was too perceptive to miss it.

"Why don't we go see what Pepper's wrangled up for dinner?" Tony's voice pulled him from his head.

He hadn't noticed it, but he was thumbing the band again, so he stuffed his hand into his pocket.

"Yeah, yeah, that sounds great. Morgan's probably looking for me again by now."

Tony smiled, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "You're a good brother, Peter. Thank you for that."

Peter shook his head. "I should be thanking you."

And he really felt he should. Tony had created time travel to bring them all back. It wasn't his fault that Peter was broken and didn't come back right.

Tony clapped a hand on Peter's back. "I guess we should just call it even."

Dinner went well. It was lasagna with garlic bread and a salad. Morgan ate the soft part of the bread but refused to eat the crust, she nibbled the lettuce like a rabbit, and spread her lasagna across her plate. He wasn't really sure she ate much, but her giggling and chatter eased some of his nerves.

Every time he looked down at his wrist, though, he saw the band and thought of what he'd done, then looked at Morgan and felt a wave of shame and guilt. She deserved better than a brother who hurt himself because he couldn't cope any other way. And he was scared, too, worried that his darkness would somehow rub off on her, contaminating her. What if she learned what he did and followed down the same path?

Dinner sat heavy in his stomach after that thought, and he excused himself from the table, earning a concerned look from Tony. Peter tried to give him a weak smile and reassure him, but he knew it fell flat.

"Are you sure you're feeling okay, honey?" Pepper asked, looking ready to stand and press a hand to his forehead. He appreciated the kindness.

Peter nodded, his lips stretched in a thin smile. "I'm just drained. I haven't been able to sleep the last few nights—no, it's nothing to worry about—just been up studying. My own fault."

Tony's eyes searched his face for something, but then he let out a breath and nodded. "Get some rest, kid. We can go swimming tomorrow."

"I can do a cannonball!" Morgan announced.

Peter's smile got a little warmer. "That's great, Mo. I can't wait to see."

"You sure you don't want to stay up with me? We're gonna watch the Lion King again."

Peter ruffled her hair. "I'll watch something with you tomorrow. I promise." He waved at the table and excused himself.

When he got to his room, he closed the door, leaning back against it as his shoulders fell. He sagged against the wood, running a hand over his face. Coming to the lake house had been a bad idea. He should have stayed home, where he couldn't spread his disease. He didn't need to infect others.

The worst of it was that he wanted to cut, and his day hadn't been that bad. Maybe that made him even weaker. He couldn't even handle day to day life without feeling like he had to hurt himself. It wasn't how healthy people reacted. He was a freak.

He didn't want to snap the band, he just wanted to be better, but what else could he do? He glanced across the room at his backpack, and the knife he knew was wrapped up inside. Tony would never know. If he was careful, he could hide it. They weren't expecting him to leave his room until morning, and by then, everything would be healed.

No, he couldn't. He crossed the room to his bed and laid down. He would sleep through the urge.

He needed to be better.

Peter kneeled on the ground, his knife in his hand, pressing to his arm, blood dribbled down his wrist, and dripping on the grass. He was at the lake house, in front of the porch, and Morgan was watching him, a knife of her own held in her small hands. She watched his movements, then looked at her arm and began to cut like Peter. He wanted to stop her, to scream no, but he couldn't find his voice.

Peter woke with a start, clutching the sheets and panting for breath. It was dark except for the crisp moonlight cutting through the window. His stomach churned of the memory of Morgan's chubby little fingers wrapped around the knife. The edges of his vision began to darken as he struggled to breathe, spots dancing. Bile rose in his throat, bitter-tasting on the back of his tongue.

He blindly felt around his wrist for the band and began snapping it, but the sting wasn't enough to ground him, though it did help a little. The skin started to get sore, but he kept going, finding a steady rhythm.

His heart began to slow, and his breathing settled, but he needed air. The walls still felt too close, too confining. If he were back home, he'd go to the roof. Tossing back his blanket, he slipped from the bed and walked barefoot out of his room and down the stairs. He was careful to walk quietly so as not to wake anyone up. He went out the back door and onto the porch, sitting down on the bench and looking out over the water. The moonlight reflected over the surface, causing ripples of light that stretched across the lake.

Instead of snapping the band, he began to dig his thumbnail into his arm. He needed it, just for a minute. It would stop the spiral and let him breathe. The pain grew, the harder he pushed, and blood started to bubble up. It looked black in the moonlight and oddly satisfying.

His eyes fell closed only to snap open when he heard the door.

"Pete?" It was Tony. He was dressed in sweats with a tank.

Peter tried to shift his arm and hide the blood trail that marked his arm, but it only made it that more obvious. Shame crashed over him, and his heart began beating out of his chest.

"It's not what it looks like." Peter's voice broke over the words.

Tony's eyes were on the small river of blood leading toward his wrist. His gaze broke away from it to meet Peter's, and it took everything Peter had not to shrink under the intensity. He didn't look angry. That would have been easier. No, Tony looked worried and hurt, which was so much worse.

Maybe seeing Peter struggling, Tony's expression softened even more, and he sat down beside Peter, looking out over the lake.

"You did it to yourself." And it wasn't really a question. Tony was telling him.

Peter looked at the water, frowning. The blood on his arm was drying, and the small wound was already closing. There was no point in lying, and if Peter was honest, he didn't want to lie. He carried enough—he didn't have room for lies, too.

"Yeah," Peter breathed, feeling a weight lift.

He could see Tony nod beside him, and they sat in silence for a little longer, the water lapping the shore the only sound.

“How long?”

That wasn’t an easy question. Had he ever gotten better, or had he just tricked himself into believing he had? Was this something he would ever heal from?

“After Ben.” Peter’s voice was a hoarse whisper. “And then after the battle, after coming back. I—I don’t think I came back right, ya know?”

Tony looked at him, and Peter dared a quick glance. Tony’s eyes dropped to the blood, and then he looked out over the water again, so Peter did, too.

“Why didn’t you come to me? I should’ve—I knew something was going on. The rubber band, right?”

“Yeah, uh, it’s a coping thing?” It came out like a question, and he wasn’t sure why. Maybe because it failed to work when he needed it. “May knows,” he added, not really sure why.

“Do you we—what do we do here? Do you need to talk? I feel like I should be angry, but I don’t want to be, kid. I just want you to be okay. I feel like I dropped the ball. Can I ask—can I ask why?”

Peter sucked in a breath, fisting his hands in his lap. “I don’t know, I guess. It wasn’t something I set out to do. It just happened one day, and then I couldn’t stop, but it’s not like before. I used to be worse, I guess. I’ve only really done it once since coming back, for real anyway.”

Tony sucked in a breath. “Is it always just scratching? That’s what you did tonight, right? It looked like you did it yourself.”

Something inside Peter tightened. He didn’t like talking about this, but he didn’t want to lie. Maybe it would help to talk about it. “Um, no, I mean, sometimes—I have a knife.”

Peter chanced a look at Tony and saw he had gone still.

“Did you bring it with you?” There was something Peter couldn’t place in his tone, and it made his stomach knot.

“I, uh ... It’s in my bag. I wasn’t going to use it here.” He felt like he should explain. “I wouldn’t do that. I just—it made me feel better having it. Just in case.”

Tony made a noise of acknowledgment, then sucked in another breath. “Okay, well. I’m going to need that.”

Peter swallowed; his palms were sweaty now. “Yeah, I understand.”

“And I’m talking to May about this. We are going to get you some therapy, something. I lost you once. I can’t—I won’t lose you again.” There was a finality to his tone, and Peter knew better than to argue.

“I really am sorry.”

Tony looked at him, then wrapped his arm around his shoulders, pulling him into his side. “Don’t apologize for this. Yeah, I don’t want you hurting yourself, and I don’t really understand, or maybe I do. I don’t know. I just—it’s not your fault. We’ll figure this out. You’re not alone.”

Tears blurred Peter’s vision, and he slipped his arms around Tony’s waist, burying his face in his

chest. “I don’t want to be like this.”

“I know, kiddo. I know. I promise we’ll figure this out. We just need to take this one day at a time.”

Tony rubbed a hand up and down Peter’s back, and they stayed huddled together until the sky began to lighten, and Peter’s neck started to ache. He rubbed his eyes, sitting up and looking out over the lake.

Red and orange painted the horizon as the sun crested the mountains in the distance. Morgan and Pepper would be up soon, and he needed to clean himself up. The dried blood on his arm was still there, flaking away, but the crescent-shaped cut from his nail was gone.

Tony rubbed his back a little more and took his arm from around Peter and rubbed his eyes. Peter couldn’t help but notice how tired he looked now.

“I think we know what we need,” Tony said, looking away from the sunrise to Peter. “Waffles. Iron Man waffles. They’re like magic, can fix anything.”

Peter knew waffles weren’t going to fix anything, but he still found a smile tugging at his lips. “I can’t believe you buy your own merch.”

“I’ll have you know, Rhodey bought the waffle maker.” He tipped his head to the side. “Now the shower curtain, that’s another thing. I can’t help it. I like how I look.”

Peter huffed a laugh, absently fingering the band. “I should probably go get washed up before Morgan wakes up.”

“You okay?” Tony’s eyes were full of concern.

He looked at the blood on his arm. “You know, I don’t think I am, but I’d like to be.”

Tony nodded, nudging his shoulder into Peter. “It’s okay not to be, but, Pete, I need you to bring the knife down.”

He looked out at the water and then at Tony. “Yeah, that’s probably for the best. Do I really need to talk to someone? What about, you know, Spider-Man?”

“Let me take care of that. I’ll find someone we can trust. You’ll tell me if it gets bad, right? Until we find someone, I need to know you’re safe.”

“Yeah, the, uh, the band helps, but if it gets bad, I’ll try to tell you. I just—it’s not always the easiest thing. I don’t always think things through.”

Tony drew a deep breath. “Okay, I guess I’ll take what I can get. Enough with the heavy stuff. Why don’t you go clean up and get the thing we talked about, and I’ll go warm up the waffle iron.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

He knew things wouldn’t be instantly better, and he knew waffles wouldn’t fix the pain, but maybe it was the first step to making things better, a soothing balm over a raw wound. He didn’t need to hide anymore, and he wasn’t alone. Help was waiting. He just needed to reach out and take it.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Peter has a relapse and Tony is there for him.

Chapter Notes

This was prompted to me by littlemissagrafina, who wanted a second chapter. It took me a few weeks, but I sat down today and wrote it. I hope you like it.

In the kitchen at the lake house, Peter sat at the center island, watching Tony thread macaroni onto yarn as Morgan painted the necklace she'd already made. Noodles were scattered everywhere, and when you walked, there was a good chance you'd hear pasta crunching underfoot.

Morgan had paint from her hands to her hair, and Tony wasn't fairing much better. Morgan had already made them all necklaces and was working on her fifth. The one she'd made Peter was draped around his neck. She'd said the one she made him was extra special because it had wagon wheels laced between the macaroni.

Peter was on the end of the island on a stool, his textbook carefully placed to avoid the smears of paint and glue. Thankfully, after the glitter balloon incident, Pepper banned glitter from the house, so Peter didn't need to worry about that.

All in all, he should have been happy, but he wasn't, and he wasn't sure why that was, either.

Things had been better in the months since Tony had found Peter on the back porch that night, since they'd talked about his self-harming, but that didn't mean that sometimes, for a reason Peter didn't understand, he still had bad days—like today.

Everyone in his life was healthy and happy, things were going well at school, but he still couldn't get the itch to cut out of his mind. Some days were definitely worse than others, and he'd been building toward this bad day all week. The rubber band on his wrist was getting plenty of use.

Tony had told him that he could come to him whenever he needed but seeing Tony smiling as he played with Morgan, he knew he couldn't. He couldn't bring the mood down. He didn't want to be the reason the worry lines in Tony's face deepened.

It was already hard enough to use the rubber band with Tony nearby. He always got this look—somewhere between sadness and concern. Peter hated causing that look, so he'd done the only thing he could to avoid it. He stopped snapping the band when he was with Tony.

It was easier this way. What Tony didn't know, couldn't hurt him, or at least, that's what Peter told himself.

The cloud over Peter's head wasn't lightening up, and he felt overwhelmed like his lungs were

filling with water, and he was going under. He fingered the band on his wrist, wanting to snap it, just to feel something, but then Tony laughed, and Morgan giggled, the box of macaroni spilled, and Peter—Peter just couldn't do it.

He closed his textbook and excused himself from the table, mumbling that he had a headache and needed to lay down. Before he made it out of the kitchen, Tony called after him, telling him dinner was in a few hours and he'd check on him then.

Peter forced a smile, ducking his head and scurrying up the stairs, leaving the sounds of Morgan's laughter behind him.

When he got to his room, he shut the door, falling against it, still clutching his textbook. He didn't have a headache like he'd told Tony, but he didn't know what else to say at the time, though with the tension in his body, a headache was a real possibility soon.

He kicked off the door and walked over to his bed, pausing by the desk to drop his textbook with a thump. He collapsed on the bed, so his legs were still hanging off the side.

With Tony no longer able to witness it, Peter snapped the band on his wrist, but it brought no relief from the deep need to cut. The feeling was so consuming Peter thought he could taste it. The flavor reminded him of ash. He hated that he felt this way, but he didn't know how to control it.

Tony had paid for therapy, and May made sure he went, but the coping skills only helped so much.

When it was like this, nothing else seemed like it could scratch the itch—not as well as a knife.

His therapist had suggested holding ice cubes when the urge got bad, but that would mean going to the kitchen, and Tony would notice. He would ask. Then worry lines would etch the man's face, and Peter would feel even worse because he put them there.

Drawing on his arms was a nearly laughable suggestion. His therapist had suggested a red pen for effect. Peter didn't have a red pen, and it never worked in the past. The only thing he knew that could make him feel better came with a healthy dose of guilt. He knew hurting himself would temporarily make it all melt away.

But the worst part—the part that made Peter feel like a failure—was he didn't even know what had triggered it. Everything had been going well. Maybe he really did come back from the snap wrong.

Frustrated, angry, Peter sat up and scrubbed his hands over his face. The urge to just make a little cut or dig his nails just deep enough to break skin was all-consuming. The band on his wrist felt more like a reminder of his failures than a lifeline—a way to pull himself back.

He wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all.

Then it reached a point where it started to hurt in his chest, and he just needed something to focus it all back, to let him breathe, and without conscious thought, he started clawing at his arm. The little stabs of pain felt grounding, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't the fix he needed.

The crescent-shaped cuts and scratches oozed blood as Peter got up and went looking for a knife, for something to cut with. He'd given his utility knife to Tony, but he thought they both knew that wouldn't stop him, not when he felt like this.

A small part of him thought he should call out to Tony, but then he remembered how happy they'd looked, and he didn't want to spoil that. He'd deal with this on his own.

He slipped out of his room, listening to make sure no one was close, then darted to the bathroom. His chances of finding something to cut with seemed higher in a bathroom.

When he got to the bathroom, he started rifling through the cabinet but not finding much. He came across spare toothbrushes and travel-size shampoos and soaps, but nothing sharp. He looked under the sink, knowing there should be a first aid kit, and where there was a first aid kit, there might be scissors.

He found his prize with a shaky sigh. Setting the scissors on the counter, Peter stuffed the kit back under the sink, pocketed the scissors, and headed back to his room.

When he got to the hall, he heard Tony talking, telling Morgan something about a spaghetti monster. It made guilt twist in his gut, settling there and starting to fester.

He ran back to his room as quickly as he dared, then shut his door, locking it for good measure.

The feeling that washed over him as he took the scissors from his pocket was one part relief, one part anticipation, and the rest self-loathing. He knew he wasn't just letting himself down. He was letting those who cared about him down, too.

That didn't stop him from sitting in the desk chair, putting the blade to his arm, and cutting, though.

It happened so easily, and when he did it, he put all those bad feelings into it, turning the negative emotions and guilt into something manageable, something he could do something about. Physical pain made sense. It had a cause, a source, a purpose. And the blood that welled up from the cut made sense, too. It all made sense in a way his emotions didn't, and he needed it.

The one cut wasn't enough, though. It had been hesitant and not that deep. The bleeding was already stopping.

Peter felt like the world was muted and focused down to the blade and his arm. He pressed the metal harder against his skin and dragged it until he reached the underside of his arm. It bled much more freely, and Peter felt almost high from it.

Wanting to see more, needing the cause and effect of it, he cut again just below the second, pressing even harder. The skin split neatly under the blade.

He was just about to make another when the door handle jiggled, followed by a knock.

"Pete?" Tony's voice drifted through the door. "Why's the door locked?"

Peter's high came crashing down, and reality wasn't gentle. It hit suddenly how stupid he'd been. It was like realization hit him all at once. One thing had so easily turned into another. And Peter had taken each step without truly acknowledging the direction he was heading. And the place it brought him wasn't great. He was locked in his room with a bleeding arm, having used Tony's scissors, and ignored every chance he'd had to reach out for help. Tony had only been a shout away.

His body felt like it had locked up as the emotions swirled within him. He dropped the scissors on the floor, clattering against the wood, and he looked down at his arm, really seeing the damage for the first time outside of the warped lens of need.

It was bad. It was really bad. He might not need stitches, but it would be close, and the blood was everywhere. There were droplets on his jeans and on the floor, rivulets running down his arm.

He didn't know what to do or what to say. His voice had been stolen by the grief he was feeling. He wasn't just mourning himself. He was mourning the loss of trust he knew he'd just caused. He wasn't ready to face the music.

The door handle jiggled again, and there was another round of knocking, even louder. "Peter, open the door."

His heart kept hitting his ribs so hard he thought it would bruise.

He didn't want to lie, but he didn't know how to tell the truth. He hated himself for not just telling Tony how he'd been feeling. With more clarity than before, he realized now that Tony would probably have been proud.

He wouldn't be proud now.

He would be sad or angry or worse—disappointed.

If Peter were honest, he was pretty disappointed in himself, enough for the both of them, enough for the world. He felt like a failure.

He didn't want to be a liar, though, but he didn't know what to do, so he called out to Tony, "Just a minute."

He grabbed some tissues from his desk and tried to dab some of the blood up, but it just smeared it around, making his arm look like part of a crime scene. He'd really done it this time. Once Tony saw, there would be no going back. He'd see how broken Peter was and not want him anymore. No one wanted to deal with this, no matter how much they said they cared.

Tears started to well in his eyes, and he was frowning so hard his face hurt. He kept a tissue pressed to the deepest cut and stood. He looked to the window, considering escaping the only way he could. He knew it wasn't an option, though, and would only make things worse.

Accepting his fate, his body and mind feeling weighted, Peter shuffled to the door and unlocked it. He stepped back so it could swing open, closing his eyes and waiting for Tony to realize.

There were footsteps and Tony saying, "You know you're not supposed to lock the door."

Then Peter heard it. The air sucking into Tony's lungs.

Peter's shoulders fell, and the tears in his eyes broke free, rolling down his cheeks.

"Jesus Christ." Then a hand grabbed his arm, and Peter opened his eyes, his eyelashes clumped together by tears. The devastation was clear on Tony's face.

"I'm sorry," Peter said. The apology wasn't nearly enough, though. Nothing really would be. There weren't words for times like these.

Tony's expression was pinched. He shook his head, letting out a breath, then saying, "I'm not mad. I'm really not."

And Peter wondered who he was trying to convince.

Peter nodded, his face twisting into something ugly and raw. "I don't know what happened. I know I shouldn't have—I didn't mean it. You gotta believe me."

Tony's expression softened, and when he swallowed, it looked painful. "We can talk about it later.

Let's get you cleaned up first."

Then he was guiding Peter to his bed, sitting him down. He grabbed some extra tissues and pressed them to the wounds.

"Hold those there. Keep pressure. I'll go get the first aid kit." Then Tony's foot hit the scissors, and he looked down, his head shaking a little. He bent down and picked the scissors up. Licking his lips, he said, "Will you be okay for a second?"

Peter wasn't sure he'd ever be okay again, but he nodded anyway, not trusting his voice.

With a nod, Tony turned and dipped out of the room. Thankfully, or maybe not, he was back before Peter could think too much about what he'd done.

Tony pulled the chair closer and sat, the first aid kit on the desk. He dug out the supplies he needed and lined them up, opening the packets of gauze. Then he lifted Peter's hand and the tissues from the cuts, assessing the damage. The bleeding had stopped.

No one said anything, and Peter wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

With methodical movements, Tony cleaned the cuts, and a few times, Peter thought Tony had been close to saying something, but each time, he'd just shaken his head and gone back to tending his wounds.

As Tony taped the gauze in place, he finally asked, "Was there something I could have done? Something I didn't do? I just—" He cut himself off with a sigh, then straightened. "You know you can come to me, right?"

Peter couldn't meet Tony's gaze, so he stared at his shoulder. "You seemed so happy today. I didn't want to spoil it. You and Morgan—" He shook his head. "I didn't want to ruin the mood. Sometimes it feels like that's all I do, you know?"

Tony sighed, scrubbing a hand over his mouth. "I know you think—let's just say I'd rather you told me than finding you like this. I know I'm not an expert, but I could've helped distract you if I'd known. It might not have been easy, but I want the chance to help you—no matter what mood you think you're ruining."

Peter nodded, the tears back in his eyes. He felt all-encompassing guilt for what he'd done. "I don't know what to do—how to fix this."

"We take it one step at a time. Relapses happen, and when they do happen, it doesn't make you a failure." He squeezed Peter's knee. "Recovery isn't linear. It might feel like it's all over, and you can't fix it, but it's really just a little bump in the road, a little hitch in the graph. The line is still moving forward and up."

He wanted to believe Tony, but it was hard. He didn't feel like he deserved the kind of understanding Tony gave him. He felt sick for what he'd done, and it would be so much easier if Tony were angry. He could deal with that.

His arms wound themselves around his middle without his consent as he tried to hold himself together. The cuts on his arms barely stung any more, which he was thankful for. The pain wasn't a good feeling now. It didn't settle him like it had. Instead, it reminded him how badly he'd screwed up.

"Oh, kiddo," Tony said as he got up and moved to sit beside Peter. Then his arm wrapped around

Peter's shoulders and tugged him closer.

Peter sank into his side, his breath hitching as he fought a sob.

Tony pressed his lips to Peter's hair, his breath warm against his scalp. "We're gonna get through this. Just you watch."

Then Peter broke, and it was an ugly sound. He choked on the sobs as they erupted from him, tears dripping from his chin, snot clogging his nose. His shoulders shook as he fell apart, or maybe not really, as Tony was doing a pretty good job of holding him together.

And wasn't that the meat of it.

Because Peter realized amidst the tears that no matter what, Tony and the others in his life, they weren't giving up on him—no matter how badly he screwed things up.

Tony held him until he could breathe again, then he cleaned himself up and changed out of the bloody jeans, and he and Tony went to finish making dinner. Morgan was at the table with Pepper, both wearing macaroni necklaces and big smiles.

If either of them noticed the bandages, they didn't say a word, and when Tony patted his shoulder and told him to grab a chair, it felt something like forgiveness or understanding.

Things weren't always great, and the line of the graph might hitch, but Peter could see that it was still moving up, still moving forward, and he thought that just might mean he'd be okay.

End Notes

Find me on [tumblr](#)

I'm still open to prompts. I can't promise it will inspire me, but it might. There's no harm in asking.

Thank you and I hope you drop a comment or kudos. This one was really intense and personal for me, so I could use hearing what others thought.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!